

The Power of Seniority: Senator Hugh Butler and Statehood for Hawaii

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Much has been written about the Congressional seniority system and the powers given by it to a few individuals. One such individual was Hugh Butler. In 1946, the election of the eightieth Congress elevated Hugh Alfred Butler, an obscure, conservative Republican from Nebraska, to the position of Chairman of the Senate's Committee on Public Lands (later renamed the Interior and Insular Affairs Committee). During the Republican-controlled eightieth and eighty-third Congresses, Butler worked to prevent passage of statehood bills for both Hawaii and Alaska. In the interim years, he continued his fight as the ranking minority member of the committee which was responsible for the statehood question. Butler's personal role in blocking statehood for Hawaii earned him the almost unanimous enmity of those favoring statehood.

Hugh Butler was elected to the Senate in 1940 following four difficult years as Republican National Committeeman for Nebraska. Prior to 1936, he had spent his life in railroading, farming, and in the grain business. Financially secure, Butler launched his political career late in life and arrived in the Senate at the age of 62. As a Senator, Butler did not leave many legislative monuments. Rather, as a conservative, he was better known for his support for "fiscal responsibility" and his opposition to most New and Fair Deal legislative proposals.

Butler's opposition to statehood was based on several factors. Most importantly, his staunch anti-communism led him to fear extra-territorial statehood, both because of Hawaii's closeness to Asia and because of the influence there of Harry Bridges and the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union. Race was also a factor; Butler's conservatism fitted him well for a political alliance with southern Democrats who opposed statehood for racial reasons. Non-contiguity was also argued. Finally, Butler seemed convinced of the fiscal difficulties of statehood and of Hawaii's vulnerability

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to attack, although most of his arguments emphasized the anti-communist and the racial issues.

Butler served in the Senate from 1941 until his death in 1954. In his last two years he publicly supported statehood for Hawaii for political reasons, but privately continued to express his doubts. His public change of heart was due largely to his intense partisanship and to his devotion to Senator Robert A. Taft, who, while seeking the 1952 presidential nomination, had pledged himself to support statehood. The Republican platform of 1952 called for "immediate statehood for Hawaii," and Butler, in his zeal to elect a Republican President and Congress, supported this change in official party policy.¹

Once called "the most inveterate opponent of statehood for both Alaska and Hawaii,"² Butler took up the issue immediately upon the conclusion of World War II. In response to a lengthy letter from Nicholas Murray Butler, he agreed that independence for all such territories was preferable to statehood or other continued United States control.³ In 1946, following the election of the eightieth Congress, Butler assumed the chairmanship of the Committee on Public Lands. He soon suggested attaching Alaska to Montana or Washington, and indicated that "the closest I think they [Hawaii] will ever come to that [statehood] will be to become part of California."⁴

The earliest evidence of a racial bias on Butler's part appeared in two letters to constituents in 1947. Although he used the arguments of non-contiguity and anti-communism, he also argued against having crucial votes on national policies being cast by "Hawaiian Representatives and Senators, perhaps of some oriental nationality." "A lot of other people have asked me if I want to see two Japs in the United States Senate. No, I don't."⁵

Publicly, Butler's anti-communism was at the heart of his opposition to statehood. In 1948, he visited Hawaii in an attempt to make "a thorough study of the political (communist) situation in the Islands."⁶ Although he had intended to take other members of the committee with him, his plans went awry, due at least in part to a maritime strike. Since he had, by his own admission, several agents already there, he decided to go on his own. The trip was marred by several incidents, including one apparent run-in between Butler's agents and the F.B.I.⁷

Butler had contacted Assistant Attorney-General Peyton Ford concerning his planned trip and his allegations of communist control of the islands. He told Ford, "Their legislature was taken over—the lower House was taken over lock, stock and barrel." He also charged that "the recent convention of the Democratic Party was taken over." Butler urged the Justice Department and the F.B.I. to investigate the situation. Ford did not promise an investigation but did promise to pursue the matter with Attorney-General Tom Clark.⁸

In a statement at the time of his departure from Hawaii, Butler reported that he was undecided on his recommendations to the committee. He indicated his belief that the new committee in the eighty-first Congress might want to conduct its own investigation.⁹ Yet, his intent soon became clear. He had

Senator Hugh Butler (center) and aides on their arrival in Hawaii for hearings.

gone to Hawaii, he told former Senator Rufus C. Holman, because there was "plenty of communism there, and I hope to show it up."¹⁰ Upon his return, he suggested that statehood be postponed indefinitely "until the people of the Island demonstrate by positive steps a determination to put down the menace of lawless Communism." He further proposed that territorial authorities, the Department of Justice, and the Congress take cognizance of the dangerous situation in Hawaii and act to remedy it.¹¹ Butler's charges were promptly ridiculed by the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* which concluded that "those who oppose the admission of Hawaii as a state on the grounds of the 'Red menace' are either impugning the loyalty of the great majority of the people of Hawaii, or they are using this so-called issue to camouflage some other objection."¹²

Seven months after his visit to Hawaii, Butler issued his report entitled "Communist Penetration of the Hawaiian Islands." He charged that the movement for statehood was part of the Communist plan, directed from Moscow, and he concluded his report with a recommendation for an indefinite deferment of statehood for Hawaii until the Communist situation was brought under control.¹³ Consequently, in spite of President Truman's forceful stand in favor of statehood, Butler introduced legislation in 1949 which would have given Hawaii's delegate a vote in Congress and would have allowed the territory a restricted right to elect its own governor. The reaction to this proposal by the statehood forces in Hawaii was prompt and firm. Honolulu's two large daily papers, the *Advertiser* and the *Star-Bulletin* were both sharply critical, as was the *Hawaii Statehood News*, published by the Hawaii Statehood Commission.¹⁴

Butler continued his anti-communist theme in 1950. When the Interior and Insular Affairs Committee reported in favor of statehood, Butler issued a minority report. He repeated his allegations of communist domination of Hawaii through the I.L.W.U. and the territory's political machinery, and argued against a non-contiguous state. He provided statistics on the territory's population and indicated his fear that the "alien traditions" of many Hawaiians would make it "extremely difficult to inculcate any sound concept of American ideals. . . ." Instead of statehood, Butler once again proposed giving Hawaii the right to elect its own governor. The Communist issue dominated his minority report to the Senate again in 1951.¹⁵ In response to pro-statehood materials issued by the Hawaii Statehood Commission, Butler wrote to Edward R. Burke, legal adviser for the Commission and his own predecessor in the Senate. He told Burke "My opposition to statehood now is based primarily on the danger of Communist domination . . . if statehood should be granted. . . . In short, there has been no direct denial of my charges about Communism, nor has any definite program been presented as to how to deal with it if statehood is granted. . . . I would suggest that if Hawaii really wants statehood the residents of Hawaii clean house first and come to Congress with clean hands."¹⁶

The racial issue also reappeared in 1950. Butler wrote to an acquaintance in Honolulu and asked him to provide information for him. He asked for a

complete breakdown on the members of the constitutional convention and an estimate of "how long it will be before the place will be 75% or more Asiatic." He told his correspondent that he was not a wealthy man but would "contribute \$100 of my own to you" in return for the statistical information.¹⁷ Butler also wrote to an attorney in Honolulu inquiring about the strength of the opposition forces, and noted that he would "love to get a thuro [*sic*] annalysis [*sic*] of the recent vote, especially if it would show control in the hands of the orientals."¹⁸ When some of his comments were later published, Butler denied any racial intent.¹⁹

Politics also played a role in Butler's attitude toward statehood. In June of 1950, he suggested that he might change his mind and indicated that he wanted "statehood under a Republican Congress." However, in December, he urged that the Republican Platform for 1952 make no mention of statehood.²⁰ As late as May of 1952 Butler was urging delegates to the Republican National Convention to retain the 1948 pledge for "ultimate statehood."²¹

In a radio address to his Nebraska constituents on September 7, 1951, Butler claimed vindication of his anti-communist charges. He reported that the F.B.I. had taken seven communists into custody in Hawaii and he noted that he was the first member of Congress to bring that situation out into the open. He said that although many had scoffed at his charges, his 1949 report had made "quite a sensation." He indicated his racial bias once again by noting that since many of the citizens of Hawaii were of "alien backgrounds," they were "unusually susceptible to appeals to racial hatred or to Communism or other alien creeds." He again denounced the influence of Harry Bridges and the I.L.W.U. in Hawaiian affairs. He concluded by adding that he did not believe that "Hawaii should be made a State of the Union, at least until this danger is taken care of."²²

Supporters of statehood hailed the announcement by Governor F. Valdemar Peterson that he would run against Butler in the 1952 senatorial primary in Nebraska. Peterson, a protégé of Butler, had served as Butler's first campaign manager in 1940, and had run for Governor in 1946 with Butler's verbal and financial blessing. The *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* announced its delight over Peterson's filing, and friends of statehood contributed at least \$1,000 to his campaign.²³ Butler handily defeated Peterson in the April primary and continued to work to thwart a statehood plank in the Republican Platform for 1952. As indicated earlier, in May of 1952 he urged delegates to resist efforts to change the platform from "eventual statehood" to anything more specific. To another Nebraska constituent Butler left no doubt of his position as late as April: "Until the Communist situation is cleaned up in Hawaii, I am against statehood. . . ."²⁴

Then, only eight weeks later, Butler suddenly reversed himself. In a letter to Joseph R. Farrington, Hawaii's delegate to the House of Representatives and a leader of the Hawaiian delegation to the Republican National Convention, Butler wrote:

Confirming our conversation with reference to the Republican plank covering statehood for Hawaii. I beg to advise that I will do what I can to get a plank adopted

favoring immediate statehood. . . . I am not a member of the Committee on Platform, but I expect to be a member of the Senate for another six-year term and sincerely believe that Bob Taft will be our President, and I intend to go along with him in the support of his program, both foreign and domestic.²⁵

What caused this abrupt change? The answer is simple if one understands what motivated a man like Butler. Politics, party loyalty, and his devotion to Senator Taft caused him to make the switch. Taft, who assured Farrington of his support for statehood, was seeking the presidential nomination of the Republican Party. As one of Taft's campaign managers in the Middle West, Butler had little choice but to support his position on statehood. Yet, he had to be convinced. Farrington urged Taft "to handle the situation and bring Senator Butler into line." And, according to Farrington's wife, Elizabeth, he did. She wrote: "Just what was said between Senator Taft and Senator Butler, I do not know; but we were confident that Senator Taft had put Senator Butler into a situation that if he wanted to continue in the prestige positions he held in the Senate, he would have to go along with statehood for Hawaii."²⁶ Advisers to both Taft and Butler confirmed this analysis.²⁷

Farrington released the letter from Butler along with a statement to the *Star-Bulletin* on July 8. In the statement, Farrington noted that "Taft has removed one of the most persistent sources of opposition to statehood by getting Senator Butler . . . to drop his hitherto implacable animosity toward statehood legislation."²⁸ Thus, the Republican Platform for 1952 called for "immediate statehood for Hawaii" instead of the previous "eventual statehood."

Although he was deeply disappointed over Taft's failure to gain the nomination, Butler was pleased with Republican successes in November. He had changed his mind on the question of statehood for Hawaii at the request of Senator Taft, and he was pledged to support President Eisenhower and his party's platform. He indicated, however, that he still had doubts. In a letter to one of his advisers in Omaha, Butler confided:

I'm having a little difficulty going along 100% with the President's program. It was Bob Taft's suggestion . . . that I change my position on Hawaiian statehood, and it was largely at his request that I have done so. I am still no more enthusiastic than you are for the legislation, but the battle at the moment is between the two parties as to who gets the credit. . . . You don't have to argue with me that a fellow really ought to be a statesman instead of a politician in a matter like this, but the big majority in both parties are politicians this time and not statesmen.²⁹

Butler did admit to a bit of partisanship in a letter to another constituent in which he suggested that statehood was "bound to come sometime, . . . and I would rather that they be admitted under a Republican administration with the prospects of two Republican Senators than sometime when their [*sic*] might be a Democratic administration and we might lose control of the Islands."³⁰

In spite of his professed support for statehood, Butler remained eager to placate those in opposition. In response to letters from opponents of statehood, Butler offered to pass their ideas on to Senator John Stennis whom he felt

would take the leadership of the opposition in the Senate. Southern antipathy to statehood was constant. The *Omaha World-Herald* reported that Senator James Eastland, Dem., Miss., hinted at a filibuster against the statehood bill because the election of Senators from Hawaii would mean "two votes for socialized medicine, . . . two votes for Government ownership of industry; two votes against all racial segregation, and two votes against the South on all social matters." Eastland charged that these additional Senators would use federal powers to "destroy our dual schools, our social institutions and harmonious racial relationships."³¹

Seemingly convinced that a statehood bill soon would be passed, Butler turned his attention to the anticipated elections which would be necessary with statehood. In an earlier telegram to President-elect Dwight Eisenhower, Butler had urged the appointment of Samuel Wilder King as territorial governor noting that "no other . . . candidate can acquire the support from the Oriental group that we must have in 1954 if we [are to] elect two Republican Senators."³² King was subsequently appointed. Butler continued to urge Republicans to make plans for statehood for "the job then will be to see that we elect real Americans to the Senate and to the House."³³

By the time of his death in July of 1954, Butler was on record as favoring statehood for both Alaska and Hawaii, although his enthusiasm for either was open to question. His opposition, based partly on sincere convictions and partly on partisan political considerations, waned somewhat as the drive toward statehood gained momentum. His age and declining health may also have contributed to his lessened activity in opposition. Though publicly supportive of the proposed legislation, in private Butler still indicated reservations. He seemed to be relieved, in May of 1954, to be able to report to an opponent of statehood that he was convinced that the bills were buried in the House of Representatives. He added that if such bills were reintroduced in the next Congress, "they'll be a long time getting through a committee on either side of Congress."³⁴

Butler died on July 1, 1954. Statehood was still in the future. Although it would be presumptuous to give Butler all of the credit for the failure of Congress to provide statehood for Hawaii earlier, certainly he must be given his share. Several reasons for this conclusion stand out. First, Butler's unrelenting anti-communism, fueled by the Hiss trials, internal security probes, and McCarthyism, convinced enough Congressmen that it was better to go slowly on the question of statehood. Secondly, the quiet racial argument, with emphasis on population statistics, appealed to southern members of the Senate who believed that statehood might mean members of the Senate who would favor desegregation measures and in other ways weaken southern domination of the Senate. Finally, in his position as chairman of the Committees on Public Lands and Interior and Insular Affairs, Butler was able to exert personal pressure to cause others to decline to support statehood openly. In his capacity as committee chairman, Butler was able to delay the movement for statehood. These factors combined to make Hugh Butler "one of the greatest

handicaps . . . to obtaining statehood for a long, long time. . . ."³⁵ The entire sequence of events provides another example of the power of one man in a Congress ruled by seniority.

NOTES

- ¹ Kirk H. Porter and Donald B. Johnson, *National Party Platforms, 1840-1960*, 2nd ed., (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961), pp. 454, 504. The Platform in 1948 called only for "eventual statehood" for Hawaii.
- ² Ernest Gruening, *The Battle for Alaska Statehood* (Seattle, 1967), p. 57.
- ³ Nicholas Murray Butler to Hugh Butler, 10-30-45; Hugh Butler to Nicholas Murray Butler, 11-2-45, Hugh Butler Manuscripts, Nebraska State Historical Society. Hereafter referred to as Butler MS.
- ⁴ Hugh Butler to P. E. Spalding, 12-10-46, Butler MS.
- ⁵ Hugh Butler to Esther Van Orsdel, 7-15-47; Butler to Mrs. A. Picard, 8-22-47, Butler MS.
- ⁶ Hugh Butler to Robert A. Taft, 6-30-48, Robert A. Taft Manuscripts, Library of Congress. Hereafter referred to as Taft MS.
- ⁷ Hugh Butler to "staff," 10-27-48, Butler MS.
- ⁸ Transcript, telephone conversation, Hugh Butler with Peyton Ford, 8-7-48, Butler MS. Elizabeth P. Farrington to the author, 11-18-65.
- ⁹ Press release, 11-14-48, Butler MS.
- ¹⁰ Hugh Butler to Rufus C. Holman, 9-14-48, Butler MS.
- ¹¹ Press release, 6-24-49, Butler MS.
- ¹² *HSB*, 9-28-49.
- ¹³ "Communist Penetration of the Hawaiian Islands," Report by Hugh Butler for the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, 80th Congress, 2nd Session.
- ¹⁴ *Hawaii Statehood News*, 2-23-49.
- ¹⁵ For a summary of Butler's opposition see "Report Number 1928" of the Senate Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, 6-29-50, 81st Congress, 2nd Session, pp. 47-59; see also "Report Number 314," 5-8-51, 82nd Congress, 1st Session, pp. 66-69.
- ¹⁶ Hugh Butler to Edward R. Burke, 8-27-50, Butler MS.
- ¹⁷ Hugh Butler to Jonathan A. Lee, 3-18-50, Butler MS.
- ¹⁸ Hugh Butler to Kenneth B. Dawson, 3-28-50, Butler MS.
- ¹⁹ Hugh Butler to Ben Kuroki, 6-10-51, Butler MS. Kuroki's *York (Nebr.) Republican* was highly critical of Butler's stand on statehood.
- ²⁰ Hugh Butler to Albert White, 12-13-50; see also Hugh Butler to R. A. Watkins, 6-30-50, Butler MS.
- ²¹ Hugh Butler to Herbert J. Hughes, 5-12-52, Butler MS.
- ²² "Report from Washington, # 9," 9-7-51, Butler MS.
- ²³ *HSB*, 10-31-51; Elizabeth Farrington to the author, 11-18-65.
- ²⁴ Hugh Butler to Stella Pettijohn, 4-28-52, Butler MS.
- ²⁵ Hugh Butler to Joseph R. Farrington, 6-26-52, Butler MS. Taft had informed Butler of his support for statehood for Hawaii at least as early as July of 1948. Taft to Butler, 7-1-48, Taft MS.

- ²⁶ Elizabeth Farrington to the author, 11-18-65.
- ²⁷ Thomas H. Shroyer to the author, 10-12-65; Kirkley Coulter, interview, 8-18-65.
- ²⁸ Ernest Gruening, *The State of Alaska* (New York, 1954), p. 575.
- ²⁹ Hugh Butler to William C. Fraser, 1-20-54, Butler MS.
- ³⁰ Hugh Butler to J. Lloyd McMaster, 3-16-53, Butler MS.
- ³¹ *Omaha World-Herald*, 12-24-53; Ernest Gruening, interview, 8-27-65. Gruening wrote to President Truman in 1951 and said that at a Governors' Conference, Georgia's Herman Tallmadge admitted that he was opposed to statehood because it would mean four more Senate votes for cloture. Gruening to Truman, 11-26-51, Harry S. Truman Manuscripts, OF 400, Truman Library. See also Butler to William C. Borthwick, 4-27-53, and Butler to A. M. Churchill, 1-29-53, Butler MS.
- ³² Hugh Butler to Dwight D. Eisenhower, 12-31-52, Butler MS.
- ³³ Hugh Butler to William C. Borthwick, 4-27-53, Butler MS.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 5-10-54; see also Hugh Butler to William C. Fraser, 7-23-53, Butler MS.
- ³⁵ Elizabeth Farrington to the author, 11-18-65.